

**Conflict Between Illusion And Reality: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's
The Shadow Lines.**

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Amitav Ghosh is a world renowned Indian author and novelist known for his works in the English language. His writing often shows an amalgamation of cultures expressed through the use of various languages. He has received numerous awards for his works in the year 2007, he was awarded the Padam Shri by the Government of India. His writings are unique and contributed a lot to Indian writing in English. *The Shadow Lines* is one of such writings, a highly innovative novel. It received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1989. The novel, according to A. K. Ramanujan "weaves together personal lives and public events" (qtd. in Trivedi). This novel has various themes such as nationalism, freedom, violence, memory and conflict between illusion and reality. This theme is represented through various characters of the novels. Illusion means false notion and reality means truth. The title of the novel also depicts conflict between illusion and reality. In the novel, 'Shadow' stands for illusion and 'Lines' stands for reality. Thamma, the narrator's grandmother, plans to fly to Dhaka in 1964; she asks her son if, "she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane" (Ghosh 151). Her son laughs at her and asks her if she thought that "the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas" (qtd. in Sapra). The grandmother says that at least there must be some trenches. When she hears that she might see green fields, she said:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to
know? I means, where's the difference then? And if there's no
difference both sides will be the same: it'll be just like it used to
be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in
Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. what was it all

for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there

isn't something in between?(Ghosh 151).

This shows the failure of her nationalist faith. In the absence of any clear cut division, the meaning of nationalism becomes quite unclear. She is born and brought up in Dhaka, has to accept the stern reality that 1947, Dhaka is no longer her home. Dhaka would remain a 'home' only in her memory, a 'home' that she could not go to. Her own Dhaka would become a foreign land and she would be unable to understand "how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (qtd. in Chaudhari). As a young girl in the disturbed years of the freedom struggle she had seen for herself what shedding blood for the sake of the country had meant, and she had been inspired enough by the freedom-fighters to join the terrorist movement, she was even ready to kill and she keeps this cruelty till the end. That is why she believes Illa is wrong to make England her country; if she does so, it is because "she's greedy; she's gone there for money" (Ghosh 79). The grandmother thinks that Illa's claim to be free outside India is false as freedom cannot be bought "for the price of an air ticket," for it is much more than being "she wants to be left alone to do what she pleases"(89). But according to narrator Illa does not use her imagination to find out the real meaning of freedom. Tridib believes in the ideal world and finds happiness in neutral places. According to grandmother he wastes his time in gossip with young never-do-wells at street corners and tea-stalls. For her "time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy, if it wasn't used" (qtd. in Amin). But, he is caught up with the world of story, the world of creative illusion. Sometimes his illusion creates a story that is truer than reality.

After arriving in Dhaka, the grandmother tries to persuade her old uncle to move to India, where she thinks he belongs but the old man refuses to take partition seriously. He believes that if he starts moving he will never stop. He tells her that

I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're

Going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to

draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where

will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me,

I was born here, and I will die here.(Ghosh 215)

The old man does not want to go to India and to take partition seriously. And when he does agree to move, it is the end for him. The stay at home can survive, because his illusion keeps him alive; reality can kill. The grandmother's response to the notion of freedom and nationalism raises questions about the meaning and desirability of nationalism. Her narration of her personal memories of the terrorist movement in Bengal reveals her secret desire to have been part of the militant resistance to colonial power and her understanding of the nation is rendered in terms of baptism through bloodshed:

They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders

with blood. . . . War is their religion. That's what it takes to

make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born

this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become

a family born of the same pool of blood. (Ghosh 78)

But after Tridib's death, Thamma's idealism fades fast, as she witnesses the anarchic tendencies gaining control over the land. She reverts to a militant form of nationalism and she donates her jewellery to the Defence Fund. Now it is 'us' and 'them' – 'them' being all those who live in her former homeland now.

Narrator thinks that Illa loves him. He has been infatuated with her looks. As he passionately approaches her in the cellar of Mrs. Price's house after the Christmas Eve party, she says: "You were always the brother I never had. I'm sorry. If I'd know, I wouldn't have behaved like this. Really, believe me" (Ghosh 111)

Illa is a puzzling character. All the time, she tries to get freedom from Indianness and feels that Indian milieu is stranger to her. She tries her best to be accepted by the people of the England, but her experience tells that she will never be completely accepted by them. As a child she had studied in various schools in different countries but in the group photograph of her class she figures as standing apart, not quite one of the group. Although, she tries her best to convince the narrator that she was popular and accepted by her group. But in reality

she is a victim of racism in the International school in England and suffers, physically and emotionally, as her classmates reject her. Naturally, she feels isolated and miserable. She wants to enjoy the present and experience the world through the senses. When she visits India, she asks Robi and the narrator to go with her to a bar for a drink. They unwillingly accompany her. But when Robi does not let her dance with stranger, she becomes angry. Neogy here says: “Neither in India nor abroad does Illa show her awareness of the *bhadralok* lifestyle of modern Bengal, which is essentially a mix of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ –the outward mannerisms of western speech and dress co-existing in complete harmony with orthodox basic concerns of family life and morality” (74).

Eventually, in her efforts to establish her roots in the West, she marries Nick, an Englishman. He is disloyal to her soon after, yet she decides to be his wife and continue to stay in England. Her disillusionment brings into focus the strengths and limitations of the two cultures. She finds Indian culture too conservative. But generally speaking, in India institutions like marriage are considered stable. Illa rejects everything Indian, but eventually she finds herself ‘clinging’ to her uncle Robi and the narrator – the members of her family from India who have shared a common loss, the death of Tridib. Illa’s fight is against the traditions of a traditional society. She fails to realise that the old form of restraint are being replaced by new form of restraint, which shapes one’s personality. Neogy asserts here: “The sanctity of the man-woman relationship in a marriage is essential to the old order. In the pursuit of a new kind of freedom – one that would enable her to realise her true self, Illa is confronted with a different set of problems: the absence of fidelity and trust in her marriage”(75).

The only way, in which she can handle the situation, is by pretending to her cousin that the reality is actually illusory and the illusory world of well-being, she creates is the reality. Illusion is not just a part of reality, it can and does create its own reality.

The narrator’s grandmother is the only character who most clearly illustrates this idea. From the beginning of the novel grandmother posited as Tridib’s opposite. She may disapprove of Tridib’s unconventionality, but Tridib can sympathize illusory with her, and sums her up as:

A modern middle-class woman – though not wholly, for she

Would not permit herself the self-deceptions that make up the

fantasy world of that kind of person. All she wanted was a

middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world

over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and

the territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she

wanted – a modern middle-class life, a small thing that history

had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never

forgive it. (qtd. in Barat)

Thus, we may say that every character in the novel has his or her stories and memories that are based partly on illusion and partly on reality. When these stories and memories are retold, they are relived as well. They interlink and participate in each other, so that in the end the conflict between illusion and reality becomes part of an illusionary perceived experience of real life. The shadow lines between people and between the countries they inhabit and call their own, too, merge and become one. The shadow lines that mark borders, that divide people into native and foreign and insiders and outsiders are not merely a physical reality for Ghosh. These lines go far deeper into the psyche and are hence more long-lasting and powerful. When characters break these lines, they become part of the world around them and if they do not break them they remain outsiders. Ghosh believes that borders are created artificially and are more in people's minds.

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